(1)

Today's panel deals with "Themes & Variations: Warren Sonbert's Approach To Narrative", the title of which immediately reveals the paradox at the heart of all of Sonbert's mature work. No independent, let alone "avant-garde" filmmaker, loved or was better schooled in classic narrative cinema than Warren Sonbert. Much of his life was spent studying & savoring the entire ouvres of such master directors as Sirk, Hitchcock, Minnelli, Nicholas Ray, Renoir and Dziga Vertov, but Warren was stridently opposed to endorsing any experience of cinema which makes obvious or conventional connections, either between elements within a film of any genre or between any film and its viewer. Even though Sonbert loved the narrative worlds of each of these story-based filmmakers, including such basic features as plot, character, dialogue & acting, it was the less apparent relationships of expressive camerawork, decor, color or black and white lighting and scene design, and above all, montage, to these more traditional theatrical components which Warren found most compelling and which kept each work open, alive and newly revealing for him.

Warren put his insistence on maintaining multiple & layers of meaning connections within a given film to its greatest test within his own work. Beginning his filming in the 1960s, starting humbly, with a simple spring-wound, hand-held 16mm Bolex movie camera, old-fashioned even big

(2)

the 1970s, Sonbert was immediately compelled to respond personally to and record the realities, he found himself at the center of whether spectacular or mundane. As it was for Dziga Vertov, the great Soviet documentarian, film was "the truth at 24 frames per second". But while Vertov adhered to a linear, causal relationship from shot to shot and over the course of any of his films, for Sonbert each shot was a world unto itself; and the final purpose of any of his films was not to convey a single message or tell a linear story, but to create a web of images & associations which, while intricately linked, mirrored life's openness and conflicting forces by defying clear-cut development & interpretation. As he once wrote, "The job of editing, which distinguishes film from theater or simple minded photography, is to balance a series of ambiguities in a tension filled framework." Or as he wrote another time: "My cuts are almost like slaps in the face—you get one reality, but then, no, this next scene cancels it, trumps it, by another kind of reality.... yanking you away from it before you can actually be satisfied."

sometimes as directed by himself, more often recorded as he encountered them then

And so Warren transposed Vertov's urgency to use camera and montage truthfully into distinctly late 20th century terms — stripping each recorded moment of any (customary narrative) baggage which might invite an immediately obvious interpretation or connection, and

positioning it with unexpected rapidity in an utterly plastic and changing universe. Warren recorded all manner of human and domesticated-animal activity: parades, funerals, acrobatics, amusement-park rides, high-society gatherings, tragic events, household pets at play, caged animals in a zoo, lovers at rest or working; he recorded exotic far-away places as well as unnamed city scapes. Whether black and white or color, lushly saturated or grainy and washed-out, gently moving or violently in mid-stream, each shot has something distinct to offer, like brilliant beads being displayed on a string. They are unified by gesture, social implication, texture and metaphorical association, a myriad of connections juxtaposed sometimes next to one another, but always gaining in resonance as they recur in different combinations throughout each film. With a precision equal to the most perfectly rendered schema of a Hitchcock or even of that of his nemesis Eisenstein, Sonbert was able to identify the exact movement or gesture within an undifferentiated shot which could be isolated, re-combined and given newly articulated meaning in his unravelling labyrinth.

Warren's films each contain worlds of motifs and threads of stories, some implied within an individual shot, others taking shape over the course of an entire film: Carriage Trade is about travel; Rude Awakening is about Western Civilization and its work-activity ethic. Noblesse Oblige is about journalism and the

act of reporting news events. But in the end each film's multiple levels of commentary, points-of-view, aesthetic focuses, and above all, basic visual delight in the wonderment of the movements of life, challenge even such broad interpretations and unify his work.

Perhaps Friendly Witness, one of Wareen's last and most sublime achievements, can stand for his entire body of work. Even though its ostensible subject is the exploration of intimacy between couples, it is above all about the the contemporary individual in relation to his or her environment: as an observer and surveyer, a witness to a world of increasingly infinite possibilities.

layers of contemporary points of view and aesthetic
focuses ~~[illegible]~~ as to make any simple interpretation ~~impossible~~ challenge even such broad interpretations.
Warren's ~~final film, finished Whiplash, finished according to his~~

Perhaps Friendly Witness, one of Sonbert's last & most sublime achievements, can stand for all of his work. Above all it is about the ~~individual~~ contemporary individual in relation to his or her world: as an observer and a surveyor, a potential witness to a world of infinite possibilities. It has, at its heart, the miraculous rhythms & forward thrust of life itself.

constantly contending with forces that ~~engender~~ fragmentation & dissassociation and a struggle for commitment

~~[illegible]~~ Whiplash was Warren's final work, finished posthumously according to his instructions for me it is perhaps his greatest film, the legacy he most wanted to conclude his work with. ~~In~~ it he opened his remarkable technique into new emotional dimensions, ~~encompassing the most profound human emotions of loss and~~ incorporating chance, error and even a lack of control, but with an articulateness which achieved unparalleled understanding of loss & mortality.

at times air tight and keeping the viewer at arm's length

I would like to close with one more statement written in his own words: